Trailblazers: IDF’s engineers transform the North

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The Upper Galilee in winter is far removed from the peace and tranquility of the coastal plain near Haifa and Tel Aviv.

The area along the Lebanese border has been under daily rocket attacks since October 8, when Hezbollah decided to join the Hamas assault. Hezbollah began its attacks the day after the Hamas massacre. Since then, the North has been flooded with soldiers and armored vehicles and has been on a war footing.

Israel’s leaders have vowed that the situation must change and that Hezbollah must stop its attacks and leave the border. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has said the Air Force’s legions of aircraft are pointing north.

When I drove up there in early February, the threat of rockets was ever-present. But it was also far removed in a sense because this war is being fought in a non-traditional way. Hezbollah fires rockets and anti-tank missiles, and Israel responds with precise artillery fire or uses warplanes to pound Hezbollah positions.

Some 200 Hezbollah members have been killed. More than 2,000 rockets have been fired into Israel. In fact, over the weekend of February 10, numerous interceptions of rockets were seen over Kiryat Shmona. Hundreds of buildings have been struck along the border. Almost 100,000 people have been evacuated from every community along the northern border, as well as Kiryat Shmona.

This was the landscape I drove into. To ensure that it had the feeling of a ghostly place, with enemies lurking, fog had descended. Anywhere above 600 m. in altitude in the Galilee, which is most of the mountainous region, was blanketed in fog. I ascended the winding roads from Nahariya. Hezbollah had fired rockets at the city a half hour after I passed it. From there, I went up toward Kfar Havradim, and then passed near Sasa. Here, several soldiers were manning a checkpoint. Anywhere near the border has soldiers stationed there these days. On the other side of the road loomed Mount Meron.

Eventually, the road ascended to Safed. This is a historic landscape, with ancient Jewish tombs dotting the landscape. There are churches as well in villages such as Jish, and there are ancient synagogues, like the one in Kfar Baram. This is where Jewish life thrived for many centuries, even when it was nearly extinguished in other areas of the Land of Israel.

Jewish sages from 2,000 years ago lived here, such as Shimon bar Yochai and Yohanan ben Zakkai. As such, it is a landscape that cries out to be defended from extremists like Hezbollah. The key to defending this landscape now rests on the shoulders of the men and women of Israel’s Northern Command, whose headquarters are in Safed. The symbol of the Northern Command is a Persian fallow deer, basically a deer with antlers. It bears a slight resemblance to the symbol of the House Baratheon in Game of Thrones.

It was raining when I arrived at Northern Command headquarters. I was greeted by Lt.-Col. Gil Hirschon, commander of the Engineers “Eged” unit 490. This reserve unit is responsible for engineering in the region, said Hirschon. On October 7, he was at home and went directly to his reserve unit. There was fear that Hezbollah would open a second front against Israel. Israel had trained for this, but now the reality was sinking in.

“We called our commanders and units,” he recalled. Soon the soldiers were on the scene and ready to defend the North.

Northern challenge

The problem the North has faced since October 7 is preparing the area for a conflict. That means that the engineers have had to go to work on a variety of tasks.

One is to build berms and protective areas for tanks, artillery, and other units based in the North. Another is to build new routes to communities, and new routes for infantry and vehicles. These routes might allow soldiers or civilians to approach the border and not be easy targets for the enemy, but they can also serve as routes to evacuate people in case of war.

The unit works closely with the local communities and regional council, as well as the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF). This is important because in many cases, the engineers were doing work on paths and dirt roads that may have existed in the past but needed clearing and maintaining.

Since October 8 they have built hundreds of routes, such as clearing temporary roads in various places. Some are for four-wheel drive vehicles or tanks, which have treads. Others are for private cars. It’s worth noting that tanks don’t like to drive on roads; their treads prefer dirt tracks. So making an asphalt road for civilian traffic to access a community is different than renovating a path for tanks.

The North is divided into sectors with different engineering units for each. “We all came for one purpose: to make this place as safe as possible for the civilians. That is something that is amazing about the reservists,” said the officer. The reservists are closely connected to the communities here; some of them have family from the area. They understand the needs of the people. They’ve been working around the clock to help communities such as Hanita, Shlomi, Matat, and Shtula.

Shtula, for instance, is located facing Lebanon, and often Hezbollah positions can be seen from there. The community, whose original residents were mostly Kurdish Jews, has often been targeted by anti-tank missile fire and rockets. Even though many people have been evacuated, residents continue to go to these areas to work security or deal with agriculture and animals that were left behind. Some communities have chicken coops, for instance, and someone needs to deal with cows, chickens, and beasts of burden that may be up there in the fog.

The reservists

For the reservist engineers, this has been an important experience. They have learned from their training and applied their methods to prepare for any future scenario, whether defense or offensive operations.

They have also found that the bureaucracy has moved faster than in peacetime. Previously, if a unit wanted to carve a new road out of a forest, it would take time. Now permissions are granted in a day or two.

In general, the engineers have been safe from the daily attacks. However, in one case a member of the unit was wounded by missiles fired from Lebanon.

The reservists came on October 8 and stayed for 20 days before being given a short 48-hour leave. They've been up on the border for more than four months as the winter weather and fog have closed in.

They face challenges of balancing their army life, home life, and the work life they had before the war. Many left businesses and careers behind.

Lt.-Col. Hirschon and the deputy chief of staff of the engineers, who is in the regular army unit here, also heaped praise on the soldiers stationed in the North. "Our main goal is to defend and protect Israel, and we are prepared for any eventuality. Also, the operations and protections that we have done here, as reservists and career soldiers, give the residents the most security. That is our goal."

There are plans from the Defense Ministry to support the northern communities. Defense Ministry Director-General, Maj.-Gen. (res.) Eyal Zamir visited northern towns and farms along the Lebanon border in early February. At the time, 427 houses had been damaged. The ministry has a Northern Horizon directorate to support this area.

"The directorate serves as a liaison between the IDF, the Defense Ministry, and the regional councils in northern Israel. Recognizing the challenges ahead, the director-general stated that he is committed to ensuring the security and safe return of residents to their homes," the ministry says.

Getting the job done

Meanwhile, the engineers continue their work. The missions they do had been pre-planned, and they didn't have chaos here on October 8. They knew their mission and were ready. They had a bank of missions that they wanted to do in order to prepare. However, they need to keep their tools going – the big earth-moving vehicles such as bulldozers, backhoes, and D-9s.

Not much has changed here since Hirschon was the commander of the 7086th battalion of engineers, back in the day. But some new equipment has arrived. While the D-9 is still driven the same way as in the past, some of the earth movers have computers and new technology.

Asi Hagian, a member of the 801st unit of engineers, also discussed their work. He is in a regular army unit and talked about the importance of preparing defenses in the North. This is high-intensity work amid difficult weather, he said. "We work a full-time job every day, and we do it at a very high level of ability to prepare the defenses of Israel."

He showed us several new vehicles the unit has acquired since the war began. These include big yellow Caterpillar 950 Wheel Loaders. Caterpillar says these provide a "premium performance" that can boost operator efficiencies. There is also the 966 Wheel Loader, another giant yellow earth mover. According to information online, this has a bucket capacity of 4.4 cu.m., compared to the 950 which can only carry 2.7 cu.m. of dirt or stone. The vehicles look new, and some sit in the rain; others are in a giant warehouse.

Hagian also emphasized the importance of working with local authorities and making sure to respect the environment and the natural features here, such as the streams that dot the landscape. For a landscape that looks more fitting to scenes from the Lord of the Rings, like Mirkwood, it is only natural that our soldiers would not want to anger the forests that have long been witness to Jewish history here.

After speaking to Hagian who, like several of the other engineers we spoke with is married and has children, we drove up to see one of the new roads that the engineers had built. We had come down from the mountains near Safed to the Hula Valley, and then had to ascend a road toward the area of Metzudat Koach, an old British Mandate-era police fort now used by Israel's Border Police.

For anyone familiar with the logo of the border police, which shows a kind of pillbox of a fort, it appears to be the fort here. This fort that overlooks the Hula Valley was the scene of a battle in 1948 in which 28 Israeli soldiers fell, conquering this height of land. Across the road is an old sheikh's tomb called Nebi Yusha, an Arab tomb that commemorates the "prophet Joshua." This is an Arabic tradition here because the Joshua of the Jewish tradition was buried in Timnath-Serah on Mount Ephraim in what is now the West Bank.

Ascending toward this strategic area is now problematic due to the Hezbollah threats. Therefore, the engineers have been at work, as they have all over the Galilee, building new routes and access points. There is a new asphalt road in this area. David Ben Simon, of the engineering corps, who is from Kiryat Shmona, showed us the road he helped build. He talked about how they transformed it from a dirt path to an asphalt road. Now it can be used by locals from the border communities.

"We built a number of these asphalt streets. If we understand that citizens are using this, then we will put asphalt on it. This helps to go around the area," he said. He also spoke with pride about the hundreds of routes they have created in the North.

The question now is what will become of this area. Will Hezbollah stop firing on Israel, and will we look at all this work as a thing of the past, or will this become the new normal?

In Sderot, after Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, the rocket fire became a new normal. First, there were concrete slabs and bunkers dropped in various places, ugly and gray; but then they became normal and were standardized, painted white and with pretty scenes.

Will the North become a permanent place of rocket fire, or will Hezbollah's threat be reduced?

On the foggy day that I spent with the Northern Command, the proverbial road ahead was unclear. The actual roads they had built were more certain.

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